

# A Study on Playful Attributes of Mobile Messenger

Focused on KakaoTalk applying the play theory of Huizinga / Gadamer

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## Abstract

Mobile Messenger is not just a communication tool for modern people; it provides a space to freely express desires and pursue fun and pleasure free from daily life, even for a short while. Based on the play theory of Huizinga, mobile messenger has attributes of play space which has a discontinuous continuity with reality and serves as a temporary virtual space where different rules from daily life are applied. In this space, users can pursue their free activity by their own free will, and the origins of such playfulness are derived from the media attributes of the interface. The structural and playful elements of mobile messenger are as follows: mobile messenger is a virtual space separated from reality that has 'temporal restriction' and 'spatial isolation,' which is a characteristic of the play space mentioned by Huizinga. Moreover, the interface of mobile messenger generates interactivity through the exchange of the speech bubble among the users, which is the play's oscillating movement referred to by Gadamer. This is the fundamental attribute of play movement that shows the unique play spirit and the world of play. In addition, mobile messenger has playful attributes such as manipulability, interaction, audiovisual and esthetics, and these factors can enhance mobile messenger's playfulness by increasing immersion and interest in mobile messenger.

**Keywords:** Mobile Messenger, Play space, Play activity, Interface attributes

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background and Purpose

Modern people often spend their free time using their mobile phones. A typical example of a popular mobile messenger is Kakao Talk in Korea. While the first mobile messenger was developed as part of a text service, nowadays it creates a sense of intimacy between people and is also used as an amusement space. In other words, the mobile messenger is used as a space for communication among friends and colleagues as well as a play space for enjoying individual leisure and self-expression. Related subjects are reflected in the questionnaire results of the research of Park Hyun-ju (2013)<sup>1</sup>, Park Chae-eun (2003)<sup>2</sup>, Zhuo Wei Deng (2015)<sup>3</sup> that analyze the motivation of using mobile messenger.

However, there are no studies that directly illuminate the mobile messenger from a perspective of play. Therefore, while lots of researchers conduct various studies about the playful tendency of SNS and mobile media at this point, there is a need to theoretically approach the mobile messenger from a playful point of view. Therefore, this paper starts with the question of which characteristics of mobile messenger cause playfulness, and then find the origin of playfulness of mobile messenger in the medium aspect of the interface.<sup>4</sup> Based on this background, this study aims to theoretically identify the mobile messenger as a play space and play activity by analyzing the playful attributes of mobile messenger in terms of the structural and playful aspects of the interface.

### 1.2 Research Method

<sup>4</sup> An interface means a physical medium or protocol that has been created to communicate with each other, between objects, or at a boundary between objects and humans. In other words, it refers to hardware or software that allows different devices or programs to communicate on a computer. However, the interface in this study means the electrical system and the medium connecting the mobile messenger and the user. As an electrical system, the mobile messenger's interface includes all the mechanical input/output devices, editing tools, and systematic structures that facilitate communication between the mobile messenger system and users [1].

<sup>1</sup> Park Hyun-joo, Smartphone users' motivations and acceptance of instant messenger applications: focused on Kakao Talk and Kakao Story, Master's Thesis, Department of Broadcasting and Media, Dankook Univ., 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Park Chae-eun, A Study on the use of instant messaging - Focused on the impact of personal attributes and social network, Master's Thesis, Department of Mass Communication, Yonsei Univ., 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Zhuo Wei Deng, A study on the influence of mobile instant messenger users' motivation, satisfaction, and loyalty on information sharing and diffusion: focusing on Kakao Talk and WeChat, Master's Thesis, Yonsei University Graduate School of Journalism, Dept., 2015.

This paper is based on Johan Huizinga's play theory, which develops a comprehensive and systematic discussion about play and highlights the characteristics of play across cultures to analyze the playful characteristics and attributes of mobile messenger. This paper is also based on Hans Georg Gadamer's theory, which also considers the characteristics of play as a dialogue play in terms of symbolic play that leads to language through language. These two play theories have common points in that they argue that activity is an attribute of play. The specific points of this study to be discussed through these play theories are as follows.

First, based on the play theory of Huizinga who defines humans as 'Homo Rudens,' we will examine the general characteristics of play as a fundamental act and cultural element of humans and will study mobile messenger as play through its contents. Second, we will discuss mobile messenger as a play space and play activity based on time - space limitations as characteristics of play in Huizinga's theory and based on Gadamer's theory, which explains the nature of play and reciprocity as an attribute. Through the contents, we confirm that the origins of the playfulness of mobile messenger are in the media attributes of the interface. Third, we will analyze the attributes that enhance the playful characteristics of mobile messenger by looking at the amusement element that exists in mobile messenger.

## 2 Theoretical Backgrounds

### 2.1 Huizinga's Play Theory

Huizinga defines humans as playing animals, 'Homo Ludens,' emphasizing that the origin of mankind is play rather than labor, and that culture has originated from play. He argues that play is not a simple activity but a fundamental activity of human beings older than a certain culture, and that play in human life becomes a cultural element. This is accepted as a key argument in play theory today and can be viewed as a guidance for constructing a play concept.

Huizinga writes in his book *Homo Rudens* that "play is a voluntary or immersive activity that follows the freely accepted rules occurring within specific time and space, but the application of the rule is very strict and has its purpose in play itself, and play involves other tension, joy, and consciousness" [2]. He also refers to the spontaneity, temporality, temporal and spatial constraints, and regularity of play as a general feature of play. The details are as follows.

Play is a voluntary and free activity without any sense of duty or compulsion, and the desire for play arises only from the joy and fun of play. Here, fun is a fundamental property that causes humans to engage in play. Also, play is a temporal activity that is separate from everyday life and has the attribute of 'isolation of place' and 'constraint of time.' In other words, play ends at a certain moment when it starts, and the progress of play takes place in isolation where there is a unique order and rules of the play. If the order and rule are violated, then the world of play breaks down [3]. If we briefly summarize Huizinga's concept of play, play can be defined as a free, pleasant and temporary activity which is carried out in isolated space and time separate from everyday life in

accordance with specific order and rule.

### 2.2 Gadamer's play theory

Gadamer, unlike Huizinga, saw that play originated from human life itself rather than as a cultural phenomenon. In other words, play is the most primitive function of human life, and the movement itself, which is constantly and repeatedly coming and going, is an attribute of play and this corresponds to the original self-motion. Here, the self-movement is a fundamental feature of living things, and Gadamer says that all living things have an impulse of self-motion within themselves [4], and that play also expresses those impulses through the inherent movement of play itself. In other words, play, like the natural form of movement, always expresses itself in order to reveal its own existence without purpose or intention [5]. This is the self-expression of play that Gadamer always mentions. Here, the self-expression of play is 'to allow the person to play a certain thing so that the play has its own unique self-expression' [6]. This means that play has its own essence, independent of the player's consciousness.

Gadamer explains that play is superior to the consciousness of a person who is playing. Regardless of the player, play originally exists in that place, and even if a player does not know the content or method of the play, it attracts a player with its charm already existing in that play. In the end, the main agent of play is not the person who plays but the play itself, and play is expressed only through players. Thus, the actual purpose of play exists in play movement itself to expose themselves through play [7]. In this regard, Gadamer defines 'play as a self-expression of something that has the concept of autonomy and play itself has dynamism and surpasses reality.' Here, the dynamism of play means that play is renewed through the inherent movement and continuous repetition of play itself. The dynamism of such play is identified with Gadamer's work of art, that is, play has the power to be transformed into art and he also refers to it as a transformation into a form [8]. In other words, Gadamer interprets that self-expressive activity is the essence of play and the essence of art work, and that aesthetic activity of art work fundamentally belongs to play by becoming a part of expression since its existence [9].

## 3 A study on Mobile Messenger as Play

### 3.1 Voluntary Free Activity

According to Huizinga, play is a free activity separate from everyday life. In other words, play can be delayed and stopped at any time since it is a free activity according to the voluntary will of players, not a compulsion. We can see the spontaneous and free nature of play in mobile messenger. Mobile messenger is not forced by others nor is there any sense of duty, but is carried out only by the voluntary participant's internal motivation. Especially when users login to mobile messenger to spend free time instead of for the specific purpose of communication or for work, the playful characteristic as a free activity for pleasure and amusement becomes stronger.

### 3.2 Unique Order and Rule

Huizinga says that play space is dominated by an absolute and unique order, and that if the rule is violated, then the world of play breaks down. In other words, when a player begins to play, different rules that are separate from ordinary life are applied in that space. For example, when a person goes to the theater, he/she needs to be quiet in the dark place and watch the play based on the premise that the actor is performing, not a reality. Therefore, if the audience enters the theater while the play is going on, the acting is stopped and play is not established [10]. Like theatricals, different rules and order are applied in mobile messenger independent of everyday life.

In other words, users must first enter into the virtual space called mobile messenger through his/her account (login and login). There is also a rule that he/she must invite other people to the chat room in order to communicate with them in that space. There is also a requirement that users must interact with each other through immediate feedback in response to the opposite party while in communication. Because this is not a space for a solitary monologue, he/she must create a space where users must react with another party. Therefore, if they do not respond to each other or someone leaves the chat room when the other party is talking, play is stopped and terminated.

### 3.3 Temporary virtual space

Play is a temporary world that exists within everyday life. When play begins, a sacred and independent world for the play unfolds, but the world is closed when play is over. In other words, even if the festival is held in a certain place with boundaries, the festival of revelry and free atmosphere disappears when the festival ends. In this way, play ends at some point after it begins. Like a temporary play world separate from reality, mobile messenger is a temporary space of a virtual world in which its existence is isolated from reality. In other words, mobile messenger, as a non-physical and virtual space, unfolds at a time of connection and login, and disappears at a time of exit and closing. Mobile messenger is a temporary space that can be opened and closed as needed, and its basic roots as a virtual world are connected with the real world.

### 3.4 Discontinuous continuity with reality Temporary virtual space

Play is isolated from everyday life while closely connected with it. If there is no seriousness of everyday life outside play, play loses its function. In other words, play is meaningful (leaving with it to another world) only when there exists a daily life that players can come back to later when the play is over. Therefore, there is a discontinuous continuity between daily life and play [11].

However, mobile messenger also has discontinuous continuity with reality due to the nature of the interface. In terms of continuity with reality, mobile messenger is less connected with the real world than text messaging or phone calls. Here, the connection with reality is proportional to the degree of seriousness. Mobile messenger is a more informal and less

serious communication format than telephone conversations, which is relatively close to daily life. Therefore, mobile messenger, which is not closely connected with reality, has a playful nature as a pleasant and free activity that is out of the seriousness of everyday life due to interface attributes. However, mobile messenger is not completely free from reality. Mobile messenger is a space where the real-world system (linear time flow) and value (name, title, etc.) flow into and are shared among participants with its icons playing as a contact point [12]. Within that space, they interact with each other through a form different from everyday life. This space, as well as play, will have a discontinuous continuity that exists in everyday reality, though is separated from daily life.

### 3.5 Results

In this way, mobile messenger is a temporary virtual world that exists in everyday life, and the space has characteristics of play space with a discontinuous continuity with reality, where different rules are applied from ordinary life. The purpose of play is essentially to separate itself from daily life and to express and satisfy various emotions and desires in pursuit of pleasure free from the sincerity of life. In this regard, we have clearly shown in the introduction of this paper that one of the motivations for using mobile messenger is play. Various research has revealed that fact. As we can see from a study on Mobile Messenger as play, an environmental attribute of the interface of mobile messenger serves as the origin of playfulness. Therefore, in Chapter 4, we will discuss the playful attributes of mobile messenger in terms of structural aspects of the interface more specifically. Also, in Section 5, we will look at factors that enhance the playful attributes of mobile messenger in terms of playfulness.

## 4 Analysis of Playful Attributes of Mobile Messenger

### 4.1 Spatiotemporal constraints as a play space

According to Huizinga, there necessarily exists a space for play, whether it is a physical or spiritual space, and it is also a play space in which a play-specific mental world is developed whether play occurs intentionally or naturally. This play space is characterized as an external, physically isolated place from reality. In this regard, Roger Caillois<sup>5</sup> refers to the concept of play as a 'totalité fermée' [14] designed to function without

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Caillois (3 March 1913 – 21 December 1978) was a French scholar who criticized Huizinga's theory of play and categorized play in a wider sense. He tried to broaden the definition of play, paying particular attention to dizziness play and various other plays. Caillois defines play as free activity, isolated activity, undetermined activity, unproductive activity, ruleful activity, and fictitious activity. This definition is not fundamentally different from Huizinga. Huizinga focuses mainly on characteristics of play in terms of competition and simulation, while Caillois adds luck and dizziness play. In addition, they are also different in that Huizinga is taking a historical approach while Caillois is taking a non-historical approach [13].

any external interference other than moving energy. He also explains that the area of play is a 'un espace pur' [15] as a closed, protected and isolated world.

Thus, we can see that a spatial concept is very important in which play takes place as a unique space or area for play separate from reality. Eventually, the play inevitably has the characteristics of temporal constraint and spatial isolation. Here, the spatiotemporal constraints of play are the necessary conditions for play and are distinguished from reality. In other words, when a player is present in time and space isolated from reality and then returns to reality, a play free from reality in terms of time and space, through separated time and space, has a meaning different from reality. Thus, play has temporal constraints that are terminated at the appropriate moment after starting, and it has spatial isolation from the already-partitioned space.

For example, as shown in [Figure 1], the amusement park in the city is located in the center of the real world, but it is necessary to enter that space because play takes place only at the designated time within the fenced area. This spatial and temporal constraint of play applies equally to festivals that are held for only one season in a certain place. We can also confirm this fact from the game of Yut<sup>6</sup> in which play exists in the inner part of everyday life, but is played on the board controlled by the unique law of the power separated from the reality, and the space disappears when play is over.



**Fig.1** Examples of Play Space with Spatiotemporal constraints (Source: Naver Image)

Mobile messenger structurally has this spatial and temporal constraints of play due to interface attributes. In other words, as a virtual space separate from reality, the mobile messenger interface creates and provides 'pure space' as a world opened and closed by the user, which is protected by the system and separated by users. This space is a world where rule and order are different from ordinary ones. When the mobile messenger is finished, the space is closed and the user can return to the natural state that is the real world.

The mobile messenger which is surrounded by limited time and space is dominated by the power of the unique form and order. Mobile messenger itself is a temporary world having spatial attributes as a structure with discontinuous continuity with the real world. In other words, mobile messenger has constraints of time and space as virtual space separates it from reality due to the attributes of the interface, and it can be seen that it has characteristics of play space by entering into a

unique space-time structure deviated from everyday life.

#### 4.2 Interactivity as a play activity

According to Gadamer, play is a sort of order expression, and the movement of play takes place within this order. Here, the mobility of play is the essence and attribute of play without purpose or intention. However, a player is not essential for the mobility of play. It only needs something else to respond to the player's movements. For example, play with balls continues through the free movement of the ball, which causes the unexpected thing to happen naturally [16]. Thus, play can be established when an activity maintains an interactive state as a communication system of play, in which oscillation is a movement of play, as mentioned by Gadamer. Also, in play, 'communication means not just the linguistic aspect but also a whole system of physical and basic sense [17]. Interaction occurs as well in mobile messenger.

Interactivity in mobile messenger is an important clue in both Huizinga and Gadamer's play theory. In mobile messenger, interaction is also a mental communication between users, but it starts with the physical occurrence of speech bubble through manipulative behavior. This occurrence corresponds to a repetitive movement that leads to a reaction (feedback) according to an action (occurrence of speech bubble) as a natural phenomenon that Gadamer mentions. The occurrence of continuous and repetitive speech bubble by interaction with the other party generates rhythm and flow in the interface space [18]. It is the flow of energy generated through interaction that is the reciprocal movement of play mentioned by Gadamer. Regarding the oscillating movement of play, Gadamer explains that play is the movement itself and it begins with a continuous repetition. In addition, he mentions that play is reproduced as a sequential result of the creative image which is expressed by the performance of the oscillating movement in constrained time and space. This is the self-expression and self-movement of play expressing its form of its own existence, as mentioned by Gadamer.

If we look at mobile messenger as self-expression and self-movement of play, mobile messenger reproduces the process of play as a continuous result of image that appears as a reciprocating motion of speech bubble through interaction with the other party as shown in [Figure 2].



**Fig.2** Cases of Kakao Talk's play (Source: Naver Image)

<sup>6</sup> Throwing yuts and using horses to play the game

In mobile messenger, the self-movement and self-expression of play are revealed by the occurrence of a speech bubble. If we look more specifically, the interface structure of the mobile messenger has an input and output system as shown in [Figure 2]. The user will output his/her thoughts through the image text called speech bubble according to the form of mobile messenger. Here, speech bubble is a container holding the user's thoughts and feelings. It is a fixed text and rule (rule, order) irrelevant to the user's intention. In other words, speech bubble expresses the existence of the player embedded in the mobile messenger in accordance with a rule and a form of the existing play. However, image text such as speech bubble in fixed forms is recreated continuously as it is infinitely changed and evolved by users. As shown in B and C [Figure 2], users interact with other users and reproduces the emoticons and various images embedded in them together with speech bubble. This is the occurrence of the play movement based on rule and order in the mobile messenger and the expression of the play world.

According to Gadamer, a player expresses spirit of play. Based on this, in mobile messenger, a speech bubble text that already exists reproduces itself through the medium of the player. But the representation of speech bubble is always a new iteration. The speech bubble text is recreated in its own unique way as information is added and transformed in it. In other words, it is a unique conversation method that expresses a tone and style, and is reproduced every time in accordance with the prescribed way through additional images, emoticons, and so on. In this way, the repetition of the speech bubble in the mobile messenger generates the oscillating movement through interaction between users. This is because mobile messenger has playful characteristics as a play movement that has a unique play spirit and the play world.

## 5 Analysis of Amusement elements of Mobile Messenger

### 5.1 Manipulability

The manipulation of the interface in the mobile messenger becomes an amusement element. Manipulability is a very important factor in play. It is because human beings are physical creatures that play and feel through physical bodies. In other words, as in [Figure 3], human's play is a fundamental act to feel and express through bodies such as hands, eyes, ears, etc. Therefore, human beings can feel and play through their body. This means that human beings are physical creatures and play is a process of human experience through the body, and according to Gadamer's interpretation, play is a process of expressing and revealing oneself through the human body.

However, users of mobile messenger experience psychological pleasure and fun from subjective manipulation of the interface and reaction therefrom. In other words, it is necessary to manipulate through the body in the process of typing and inputting the environmental operation of the basic interface and they achieve fun and fulfillment resulting from the

message from the reaction and the result of the process. This is an activity that requires an effort to exert its own ability, and it could be regarded as a Ludus attitude<sup>7</sup> and an Agon principle<sup>8</sup> in the Caillois's play theory. In addition, the energetic activity of such play, such as manipulability, can be converted into artistic activity with the nature of the work if the spiritual activities such as human aesthetic judgment are involved.



Fig.3 Comparison of play and manipulation of messenger  
(Source: Naver Image)

### 5.2 Interaction

In mobile messenger, the interaction of the player's manipulation behavior is an act of pleasure and an element of satisfaction. In mobile messenger, interaction takes place in various forms. It can be broadly divided into interactive responsiveness resulted from an environmental manipulation of the interface and interactivity such as conversations with the opposite party. Especially in mobile messenger, interaction through physical interaction as an environmental manipulation provides a higher immersive feeling by directly stimulating the user's sensory organs, so that the amusing attitude of the user is converted into joy and becomes much larger. In other words, the basic speech bubble, emoticons, and all the image and movement appearing on the mobile messenger are connected with the action and reaction as a result of manipulation behavior, and this connection has the characteristics of immediacy, concurrency and responsiveness. It is a factor that increases playful immersion and interest.

### 5.3 Audiovisual and synesthesia

In mobile messenger, audiovisual and movement element become playful elements. In mobile messenger, audiovisual and synesthesia elements are basically generated in speech bubble and emoticon. First of all, a speech bubble is an image that visualizes the auditory element of sound, and plays a role as a container holding words. This is not a text that is simply read to the user, but rather acts as a text that sounds like the letter A in {Figure 4}. This synesthesia plays a role as a playful element by invoking a user's imagination compared to a normal text message or chat. Moreover, 'anicon' to which movement is given and 'sticon' such as surface elements,

<sup>7</sup> A playful attitude that is the driving force of pleasure by getting over difficulties that were created on purpose

<sup>8</sup> A play principle through which individuals want to excel and prove their superiority in some areas

improve reality. These elements are accompanied by audiovisual, tactile, and olfactory stimuli which stimulate our senses and increase immersion in mobile messenger.



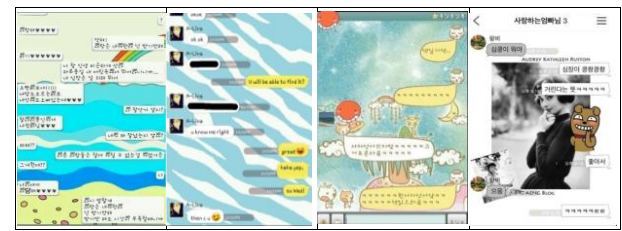
**Fig.4** Case of audiovisual and sympathetic awareness  
(Source: Naver Image)

### 5.4 Aesthetic factor

Huizinga said, "In all forms of culture, play is an embedded element, and there is a play element of joy and pleasure between art and play." Kant said, "The absolutely necessary feature of the aesthetics is the harmonious play of our mental abilities, including what happens as a result of pleasure." This means that aesthetic judgments can be made and objects could be created through harmonious play of mental abilities. Gadamer explains that play also can be transformed from the state of *energia* (energy, activity) to the state of *argon* (work, creation). In other words, play has the ability to change from being a characteristic of an activity to that of a piece of art work [19]. Many scholars say that the essence of play and that of art work are similar to each other. In other words, the formal characteristics of play are similar to the aesthetic activities, and the process has the playful elements of joy and pleasure. When an aesthetic judgment is made instead of a simple energy activity and an object is created as a result of pleasure, it can be regarded as a work activity.

By the way, if we look at mobile messenger, we can see harmonious and free mental activity by aesthetic pleasure rather than simple activity. In other words, the activity of selecting emoticons in mobile messenger, or combining and outputting character and image, is an act in which a user expresses his/her own intentions and emotions, but it is a simple play movement that is accompanied by a series of activities expressing personality and characteristics rather than an energy activity. As shown in [Figure 5], it selects various texts existing in mobile messenger like a picture diary, and it variously fills space with its own conversation. In this process, a user changes a plain and monotonous space by setting background images differently or adding emoticons in the middle, resulting from their aesthetic desire to express more beautiful things. This can be regarded as the act of composing a piece of work accompanied by mental activity, not merely physical manipulation activity, and the user feels pleasure and

satisfaction through the process.



**Fig.5** Kakao Talk space like composition  
(Source: Naver Image)

## 6 Conclusions

This paper starts with the question of what characteristics of mobile messenger cause playfulness, and theoretically identifies the mobile messenger as a play space and play activity while searching the origin of playfulness from the medium aspect of interface. The summary is as follows.

Mobile messenger is a play space that is constantly recreated by the oscillating movement of speech bubble and a space separated from reality due to the interface property. The space is a temporary virtual world where different rules are applied from daily life and has a structure that has a discontinuous continuity with reality. Especially, the temporal and spatial isolation of mobile messenger as a virtual world can be regarded as basic attributes of Huizinga's play space. In addition, play activity occurs according to the interaction of speech bubble with the other party in this space. This is self-expression of the play through the self-movement of the play itself and the reciprocal movement of the play, as mentioned in Gadamer. In other words, speech bubble is a container holding the user's thoughts and feelings and could serve as a form and rule. Users interact with other users in accordance with this rule and reproduce text embedded in it including speech bubble. The speech bubble is recreated every time through the user's own unique method, which is like play being reproduced every time. In other words, the successive result (image) of speech bubble that occurs as an interaction with the other party corresponds to the result of self-expression that expresses itself through the reciprocal movement of play. It can also be said that it is the process of expression of play spirit embedded in the play world.

As we have seen so far based on Huizinga and Gadamer's play theory, mobile messenger is a play space and activity. The communication process with the other party is like a play process. It is thought that the origin of playfulness of mobile messenger is derived from the interface attributes of mobile messenger. Also, manipulability, interaction, audiovisual and synesthesia and aesthetics as the playful elements exist in mobile messenger, it is becoming a factor to strengthen the playful characteristics of messenger. As a result of this discussion, this paper has helped to understand the playfulness of mobile messenger which existed only by phenomenon through theoretically interpreting the process of play in mobile

messenger based on interface properties. It is also thought that we provided an opportunity to indirectly identify the role the design element of mobile messenger interface including speech bubble play in the playful part. It is meaningful in that we are pioneers in this discussion of mobile messenger from the perspective of play as there are no studies in relation to this subject yet. However, this study has limitations in discussing mobile messenger as play. So, one issue for future study is to illuminate the inner structure in discussing mobile messenger as play. Therefore, as a follow-up paper to grasp its inner structure, I will try to close the gap of this paper by pledging further research on play principles and play types that operate in mobile messenger.

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